(An Article for Christian Century:)

For Your Editorial Improvement...

NEW JERUSALEM WEST
(On the Religious Right's Parachurches in Colorado Springs)

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September, 1992

A Philadelphian and former Civil War General, William Jackson Palmer, founded Colorado Springs in 1871. Regarding the region's early history, in Newport of the Rockies Marshall Sprague writes, "People flocked to Pikes Peak on the new western railroads to find health and adventure and romance in the Rockies. Among the pioneers were Englishmen who taught the easterners how to behave genteelly, and that is why the town got its nickname, Little London."

There is a lot that has happened in Little London during our 100-plus years. Cripple Creek gold mining had a major influence. So did the health institutions established here for those suffering tuberculosis. With and after World War II the military services with attendant electronic technology firms had a shaping-of-culture hand. The latest phenomenon, still in process, is the coming of Protestant parachurch organizations.

Those familiar with "The Springs" know this to be a conservative community. General Palmer began us alcohol and prostitution-free. Through the years civic benefactors have left a high culture legacy in the arts. Lots of people, concerned to conserve what they've spent a lifetime acquiring, retire here. More generals muster out to Colorado Springs than to any other city in America. Political party alignment in the county is approximately two-to-one GOP. To pick up the editorial page of The Gazette Telegraph, the city's only daily newspaper, one finds a

monotonous libertarian socio-political perspective. Religiously, this city of wide streets has lots of churches with narrow doctrine and stop sign morals.

There are other more liberal aspects to the community, but Little London is a conservative place.

We are, therefore, hospitable soil for even more conservative plantings, and such institutions have come, especially in the form of Protestant parachurch organizations. (By parachurches, I mean those groups that (a) are not related to a particular church or denomination, (b) have a fairly specific focus for ministry and outreach, and (c) usually are run by lay persons -- often former military. The parachurch groups are not worshiping bodies but they are tax exempt.)

The parachurches are not wholly new. Some forty years ago, Young Life began operations here. The Navigators were another early group; they took General Palmer's Glen Eyrie Castle for their international headquarters.

In recent years, though, the long-established parachurch groups have been joined by others coming in from all over. Since 1980 there have been thirty groups establish headquarters here. So the total number of parachurch organizations stands at 38 today. The biggest is Focus on the Family, occupying four downtown office buildings and doing $70 million a year in business. Eventually Focus plans to build a unified campus north of the city for its 800-plus employees.

The second largest parachurch group is Compassion International with an annual income of $45 million and 155 employees.

When you take the above-mentioned organizations together with others, such as International Bible Society, Every Home for Christ,

Athletes in Action, you have annual income of over $300 million and a payroll for 2,200 employees.

Colorado Springs now has more parachurch groups than Wheaton, Illinois, the best-known center for such groups. In comparing the yellow pages of the two cities, I discovered Wheaton does not have a third of the organizations we have here! No wonder one charismatic publication called Colorado Springs, "New Jerusalem West."

A dozen more parachurches are scheduled to begin operation in the next few years. World Radio Ministry Fellowship, Inc. completed its move here over the summer, along with Youth with a Mission International.

There are reasons why such groups have been coming. The hospitable conservative ideological climate is certainly one of them. The actual physical climate is another, and a relatively cheap labor pool is a third. There are other incentives. On occasion the city has provided free building sites, as for the Nazarene Bible College. The El Pomar Foundation gave Focus on the Family $3 million to move here from southern California. And the Springs' Economic Development Council has positively courted such groups. In particular, a Ms. Alice Worrell of the EDC, a person born of missionary parents in China and one who knows the language of evangelicals, has been a most effective recruiter.

Those are some of the reasons they come -- and, no doubt, many of them would say, "Because God revealed it to us."

It is precisely the religion of these folks, though, that is most troublesome to me. When I first thought to write this article, I entitled it "Fundies in the Springs." A friend asked if I really wanted to speak so negatively about fundamentalists.

I answered: "Yes!"

Really I shouldn't. It is not accurate to paint all these parachurch groups with the same stereotypic brush. There are significant differences between and among them. Some are into healing, some into serving and servicing, others stress moral issues, several emphasize the imminent coming, one is hard-line evangelical, another soul-winning through positive relations, while the next is charismatic. The parachurch groups strongly proclaim they are about different missions with different audiences employing different means.

In spite of these proclamations, there is commonality about them. If Martin Marty, et. al. with their Fundamentalism Project are right, this commonality has to do with a distrust of the secular world and a desire to return to some previously secure religious foundation -- even in "The Old Time Religion."

One may ask, "How old time?"

Joseph Campbell in Power of Myth has a couple of verses that speak to the point: "Give me the old time religion...

> Let us worship Zarathustra
> Just the way we usta
> I'm a Zarathustra booster
> He's good enough for me.
>
> or
>
> Let us worship Aphrodite
> She's a beauty and she's flighty
> And she doesn't wear a nighty
> But that's good enough for me."

Now, those are "old time religions." But those oldies are not the religion to which most of the Protestant parachurchers want to harken back. It is, ostensibly, Christianity.

Such a Christianity, though, is not great-tradition Christianity but a Johnny-Come-Lately aberration. Their Christianity is less than a hundred years old. The basic position was first formulated in 1910 and

shaped by a series of publications called The Fundamentals. The five fundamentals espoused were: (1) the literal inerrancy of scripture, (2) belief in the virgin birth, (3) the blood atonement theory of the cross, (4) resurrection of Jesus in the same body, and (5) the miracles.

Consider only the first. Inerrancy for the Bible is, I believe, key to understanding the Protestant parachurch people as a whole. The doctrine of the paper infallibility arose in great part in reaction to higher criticism of the scriptures which developed in the last century. Scholars found the Bible to be a human book influenced by the culture and times in which it was written. To people who need greater assurance than God, a human-influenced Bible is unacceptable. So the fundamental of Biblical literalism arose.

Now, there are folk today who are literalists and yet say they are not fundamentalists. They see themselves as "evangelicals" or "born again Christians" or some other descriptor. They say, to distinguish themselves from those they call fundamentalists, "We are not anti-dancing, anti-card playing, anti-make up!" From my observation of posh cars in parachurch parking lots, they also are not anti-materialism. So, they may throw out some old pieties. The Bible, though, is still considered the literal "Word of God."

Liberal -- as distinct from literal -- Christians in Colorado Springs, as elsewhere, must live out the faith with less certainty. Such uncertainty, though, is much closer to great-tradition Christian faith. We need to hear again Phyllis McGinley's poem:

> Ah, snug lie those that slumber
> Beneath Conviction's roof.
> Their floors are sturdy lumber,
> Their windows weatherproof.
> But I sleep cold forever
> And cold sleep all my kind,

Born nakedly to shiver
In the draft of an open mind.

Sleeping colder, I find it difficult to embrace the fundamental belief of the parachurch folk in our community.

More than the theological issues which trouble me, are social and political factors which alarm a wider group of citizens and Christians.

In truth, most of the parachurchers probably see themselves as a-political. A couple of the groups, though, are overtly active in the public arena -- in particular, Focus on the Family. Focus' founder, Dr. James Dobson, received the mantle of Moral Majority from Jerry Farwell. Focus has spun off several collateral -- if not front -- organizations. The most notable is the Colorado for Family Values (CFV) coalition. Last year they orchestrated the defeat of the City's Human Relations Commission's Civil Rights Protection Ordinance. This year they engineered a "no protected status for gays, lesbians and bisexuals" amendment onto the Colorado November ballot.

Focus also has underwritten a "Christian Action Council" which is especially anti-abortion and assembled a Rocky Mountain Family Council which is conducting "Community Impact Seminars" throughout the state. The seminars provide training in use of the media and on how to influence public education. The suspicion hereabouts is that Focus is also behind many "stealth candidates" now politicking in the state. On August 7, when President Bush was in Colorado Springs, he did a 45 minute radio show with Dr. Dobson.

While the other parachurch groups may not be as politically aggressive as Focus and a few others, individual members of the many parachurches are likely sympatico with what is being proposed and done by others. When

the Rocky Mountain Family Council passes a petition in favor of an abstinence-based school curriculum, the 60 employees at Summit Ministry, I suspect, get out their pens.

A response to the parachurches in Colorado Springs is now forthcoming. Concerned folk are emerging. A new group called Citizens Project is organizing under the leadership of Amy Divine and Doug Triggs. Within weeks their mailing list grew to over a thousand persons. Recently some 100-plus persons gathered in the First Congregational Church sanctuary to hear what Citizens Project was discovering about the religious right in the Springs.

The seriousness of the response to parachurch growth was signaled this Spring, when Jerry Trigg, Senior Minister of First Methodist Church, was asked by the Chamber of Commerce (no less!) to come and talk with them. They wanted to know how representative these new religious groups were of the city's faith community, generally. A number of the senior ministers of the downtown churches asked Dr. Trigg to tell the Chamber, "They don't speak for us!"

Why the Chamber of Commerce is concerned is interesting to note. They were/are finding that major companies and industries (like MCI, Apple Computer and Hewlett Packard) are withdrawing from coming to the Springs and/or having difficulty getting employees to move here because the climate is just too stifling. Their concerns are threefold: (1) Would public education be undermined? (2) Would women be accorded equal rights? And (3) Would there be tolerance for alternative life styles?

These are legitimate questions. Consider the school question: The most ludicrous incident to date is that The Cowboy Church of America tried to prevent the teaching of Greek and Roman myths in the schools of Wood-

land Park. There is not greater myth than that of the American cowboy! Regarding women, the "their-place-is-in-the-home-only" ideology and the anti-choice on reproductive rights position is frightening. And, of course, gay and lesbian persons are appalled by the carefully orchestrated "no civil rights for you" push which the religious right initiated.

At a recent meeting of Citizens Project, a discussion ensued as to how to describe the folk of the religious right. Someone suggested: "Tolerance impaired." Quite often that seems to be the case, and because it, the reaction against the parachurches has set in.

In the Gospel of John, tenth chapter, seventeenth verse, Jesus says, "I have other sheep, that are not of this fold." I turn to that passage when the conservative Christian folk try to read others out of God's Realm. Christ's "other sheep," I want to say, just may be public school teachers, outspoken women, pink triangle wearers, as well as Muslims, pagans and secular humanists. Who's in and who's out of the God's Kingdom is not for us to decide. I'm even willing to say that the parachurchers may be a part too! By no means is all they are about bad.

While we wait for tolerance to emerge in the parachurch ranks, there will be a strong reaction. That is coming, not just from liberals but from mainline Protestants, Catholics and Jews -- right here in genteel Little London. For many here want this city set on a hill to be "a light to..." with tolerance, equality, and, I hope, no theological stupidity.